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The Fate Of A Crown

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A STORY OF LOVE, INTRIGUE AND ADVENTURE

SYNOPSIS

ROBERT HARCLIFFE, fresh from college and a member of a firm in New Orleans, of which his Uncle Nelson is the head, is sent by his uncle to Brazil to act as private secretary and confidential companion to Dom Miguel de Pintra, head of the revolutionary movement against Dom Pedro. Dom Miguel had been a good customer of the Harcliffes, and he and the elder member of the firm were fast friends. Liking the prospect of adventure, Robert consented to go.

On the voyage he encountered Valcour, a spy sent by the Emperor of Brazil, who knew that the American secretary was expected. This spy had decided that Robert was the person for whom he was looking and had planned to make way with him.

But the American cleverly threw him off the scent and reached Rio in safety. There he was, however, arrested, but on the way to the police headquarters his captor was murdered by Police Sergeant Marco, a revolutionist, and he was allowed to escape, finally reaching his destination through the assistance of many devotees to the cause. At the beautiful home of Dom Miguel he learned more of the revolutionary movement. He met the Senator Lesha Paula, his host's niece, her brother Francisco—a man who puzzled him greatly—and Dom Miguel's daughter, Isabel de Mar.

The next morning he had an unpleasant experience with Madame Isabel, who had been acting as Dom Miguel's secretary, but was relieved by him. The revolutionists did not trust her. Dom Miguel revealed to him the secret of a hidden vault where all the party's papers and treasure were hidden. While they were entering the vault with lights extinguished Madame Isabel suddenly appeared, struck a light and tried to discover how the lock was worked. The father seized her, and denouncing her as a spy, sent her from the room.

Meanwhile Harcliff had been getting deeper in love with Lesha, and more deeply mystified by her brother, who was chief of Dom Pedro's police.

One night Dom Miguel aroused his secretary with the startling statement that Isabel had stolen the ring which was the key to the treasure vault. They captured her as she came from the vault with a bundle of papers. When Dom Miguel went to return them, she gashed a lamp into Harcliff's face, locked her father in the vault and fled toward Rio. The secretary followed, but she eluded him and caught a train at a distant station.

On the train she was stabbed to the heart and the dagger hanging the ring from her finger. Harcliff followed by the next train and was promptly "arrested" by revolutionary sympathizers. After a short experience Harcliff made his way back to Dom Miguel's residence, only to find the Emperor and a group of his friends there. In the shrubbery he found a man's body with the ring finger severed. Entering the house he was promptly made a prisoner.

(CONTINUED FROM LAST SUNDAY)

Chapter XIII

DOM PEDRO DE ALCANTARA.

Held the candle steadily and stared at my captor. He was dressed in the uniform of an officer of the royal guards—the body commanded by Fonseca. At his back were two others, silent but alert.

"You are here in the service of General da Fonseca?" I asked, with assumed composure.

"In the Emperor's service, senhor," answered the officer, quietly.

"But the general?"

"The general is unaware of our mission. I have my orders from his Majesty in person."

"He smiled somewhat unpleasantly as he made this statement, and for the first time I realized that my arrest might prove a great misfortune."

"Pardon me if I appear discourteous," he continued, and made a sign to his men.

One took the candle from my hand and the other snatched a pair of handcuffs over my wrists.

I had no spirit to resist. The surprise had been so complete that it well nigh numbed my faculties. I heard the officer's voice imploring me in polite tones to follow, and then my captors extinguished the candle and marched me away through a succession of black passages until we had reached an upper room at the back of the house.

Here a door quickly opened and I was thrust into a blaze of light so brilliant that it nearly blinded me.

Blinking my eyes to accustom them to the glare, I presently began to note my surroundings, and found myself standing before a table at which was seated the Emperor of Brazil.

Involuntarily I bowed before his Majesty. He was a large man, of commanding appearance, with dark eyes that seemed to read one through and through. Behind him stood a group of four men in civilian attire, while the other end of the room was occupied by a squad of a dozen soldiers of the Uruguayan guard.

"A prisoner, your Majesty," said the officer, saluting. "One evidently familiar with the house, for he obtained entrance to a room adjoining Dom Miguel's library."

The Emperor turned from the papers that littered the table and eyed me gravely.

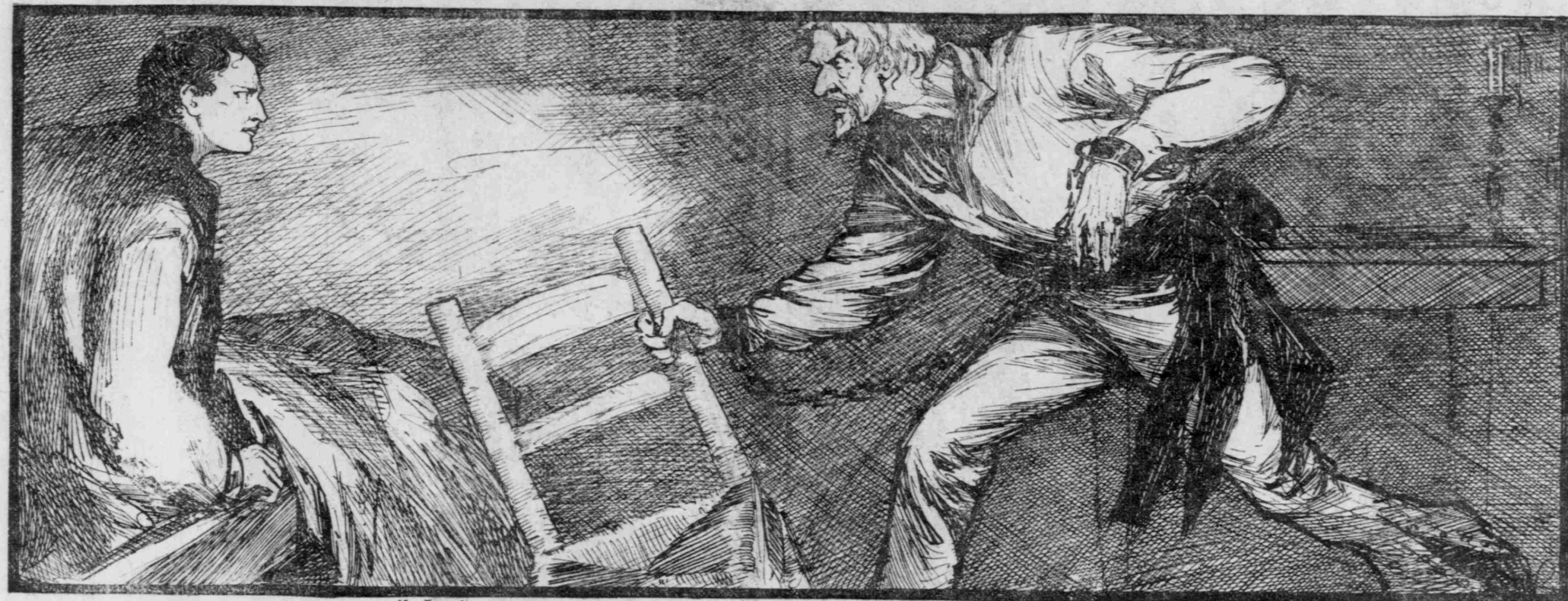
"Your name?" said he, in a stern voice.

"I hesitated; but remembering that officially I was occupying a dungeon in Rio I decided to continue the deception of my present disguise."

"Andrea Subia, your Majesty," said I, turning and saw Valcour at my elbow.

"It is the American secretary, your Majesty, one Robert Harcliff, by name."

The spy spoke in his womanish, dainty manner, and with such evident satis-



"I had never seen him before, and I had little pleasure in meeting him then."

faction that I could have strangled him with much pleasure had I been free.

"Why are you here?" inquired the Emperor, after eyeing me curiously for a moment.

"I have some personal belongings in this house which I wished to secure before returning to the United States. Your men arrested me in the room I have been occupying."

"Why are you anxious to return to the United States?" questioned the Emperor.

"Because my mission to Brazil is ended."

"It is true," returned Dom Pedro, positively. "The conspiracy is at an end."

"Of that I am not informed," I replied evasively. "But I have been employed by Dom Miguel de Pintra, not by the conspiracy, as your Majesty terms it. And Dom Miguel has no further need of me."

"Dom Miguel is dead," retorted the Emperor, with an accent of triumph in his voice.

"Murdered by his daughter, your spy," I added, seeing that he was aware of the truth.

He merely shrugged his broad shoulders and turned to whisper to a gray-bearded man behind him.

"This conspiracy must be summarily dealt with," resumed the Emperor, turning to me again, "and as there is ample evidence that you are guilty of treason, Senhor Harcliff, I shall order you put to death unless you at once agree to give us such information as may be in your possession."

"I am an American citizen and entitled to a fair trial," I answered, boldly enough. "You dare not assassinate me. For if I am injured in any way the United States will call you to full account."

"It is a matter of treason, sir," returned the Emperor, harshly. "Your citizenship will not protect you in this case. I have myself visited your country and been received there with great courtesy. And no one knows better than I that your countrymen would repudiate one who came to Brazil for the treasonable purpose of detroning his legitimate Emperor."

"That was true enough, and I remained silent."

"Will you give us the required information?" he demanded.

I was curious to know how much the royalists had learned, and in what position the republicans had been placed by this imperial visit to their headquarters. Dom Pedro had said that the conspiracy was at an end; but I did not believe that.

"I am sure you err in believing me to be in the secret councils of the republicans," I said, after a moment's thought. "I was merely employed in the capacity of private secretary to Dom Miguel."

"But you know of the underground vault? You have visited it?"

"Often," I replied, seeing no harm in the acknowledgment.

"Can you open it for us?" he demanded.

I laughed, for the question exposed to me his real weakness.

"Your Majesty must be well aware that there is but one key," I replied, "and without that secret key I am as powerless as you are to open the vault."

"Where is the key?" he asked.

"I do not know, Senhora de Mar stole it from Dom Miguel."

"And it was taken from her by one of your conspirators?"

"Have you traced it no farther?" I inquired, carelessly.

He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"My men are now investigating the matter," said he. "Doubtless the ring will soon be in our possession."

"And how about the murdered man in the shrubbery?" I asked.

The royalists exchanged glances, and one or two uttered exclamations of surprise.

"Is there a murdered man in the shrubbery, Captain de Souza?" questioned the Emperor, sternly.

"Not that I know of, your Majesty," returned the officer.

"I found him as I approached the house," said I. "He has been shot within the hour, and his left hand severed at the wrist."

It was evident that my news startled them. When I had described the location of the body some of the soldiers

were sent to fetch it, and during their absence the Emperor resumed his questioning. I told him frankly that none of the records of the republicans was in my possession, and that whatever knowledge I had gained of the conspiracy or the conspirators could not be drawn from me by his threats of death. For now I began to understand that this visit to Dom Miguel's house was a secret one, and that the royalists were as much in the dark as ever regarding the conspiracy itself or the whereabouts of its leaders. One thing only they knew—that the records were lying with Dom Miguel's dead body in the secret vault, and that the ring which opened it was missing.

Before long the soldiers bore the body of the latest victim of the fatal ring into the presence of the Emperor, and Valcour bent over it eagerly for a moment, and then shook his head.

"The man is a stranger," he said.

Others present endeavored to identify the murdered man, but were equally unsuccessful.

I could see by their uneasy looks that they were all suspicious of one another; for Captain de Souza protested that no shot could have been fired without some of his men hearing it, and the fact that the ring they sought had been so recently within their very reach led them to believe it might not now be very far away.

For all the Emperor's assumed calmness, I knew he was greatly disturbed by this last murder, as well as by the impotency of his spies to discover the whereabouts of the ring. When Valcour suggested, in his soft voice, that I had myself killed the fellow in the shrubbery, and had either secreted the ring or had it now in my possession, they pounced upon me eagerly, and I was subjected to a thorough search and many fierce threats.

For a few moments the Emperor listened to the counsels of the group of advisers that stood at his back, and then ordered me to be safely confined until he had further use for me.

The officer therefore marched me away to the front of the house, where, still securely handcuffed, I was thrust into a small chamber and left alone. Thence in the dark I found the bed with which the room was provided, and soon had forgotten all about the dreary conspiracy in a refreshing sleep.

Chapter XIV

THE MAN WITH THE RING.

TOWARD morning a tramping of feet aroused me; the door was thrust open long enough for another prisoner to be admitted, and then I heard the bolts shoot in their fastening and the soldiers march away.

It was not quite dark in the room, for the shutters were open and admitted a ray of moonlight through the window. So I lay still and strained my eyes to discover who my companion might be.

He stood motionless for a time in the place the soldiers had left him. I made out that he was tall and stooping, and exceedingly thin; but his face was in shadow. Presently as he moved, I heard a chain clank, and knew he was handcuffed in the same manner as myself.

Slowly he turned his body, peering into every corner of the room, so that soon he discovered me lying where the moonlight was strongest. He gave a start, then, but spoke no word; and again an interval of absolute silence ensued.

His strange behavior began to render me uneasy. It is well to know something of a person confined with you in a small room at the dead of night, and I was about to address the fellow, when he began stealthily approaching the bed. He might have been three yards distant, when I arose to a sitting posture. This caused him to pause, his form well within the streak of light. Resting upon the edge of the bed and facing him, my own features were clearly disclosed,

and we examined each other curiously. I had never seen him before, and I had little pleasure in meeting him then. He appeared to be a man at least fifty years of age, with pallid, sunken cheeks, eyes bright, but shifting in their gaze, and scanty gray locks that now hung disordered over a low forehead. His form was thin and angular, his clothing of mean quality, and his hands, which dangled before him at the ends of the short chain, were large and hardened by toil.

Not a Brazilian, I decided at once; but I could not then determine his probable nationality.

"Likewise a prisoner, senhor?" he inquired, in an indistinct, mumbling tone, and with a strong accent.

"Yes," I answered.

"Ah, conspirator, I see! I see!" he nodded his head several times, and then groveled sentences that I could not understand.

While I stared at him he turned away again, and with a soft and stealthy tread made the entire circuit of the room, feeling of each piece of furniture it touched, and often pausing for many moments in one spot as if occupied in deep thought.

At last he approached the bed again, dragging after him a chair in which he slowly seated himself opposite me.

"Retain your couch, senhor," he muttered. "I shall not disturb you, and it will soon be morning. You may sleep."

But I was now fully awake; and had no intention of sleeping while this strange individual occupied his seat beside me.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "A patriot?"

"Not as you use the term," he answered, at once. "I am Mexican."

"Mexican?" I echoed, surprised. "Do you speak English?"

"Truly, senhor," he answered, but his English was as bad as his Portuguese.

"Why are you here and a prisoner?" I asked.

"I had business with Senhor de Pintra. I came from afar to see him, but found the soldiers inhabiting his house. I am timid, senhor, and suspecting trouble I hid in an outbuilding, where the soldiers discovered me. Why I should be arrested I do not know. I am not a conspirator; I am not even Brazilian. I do not care for your politics whatever. They tell me Miguel de Pintra is dead. Is it true?"

His tone did not seem sincere. But I replied it was true that Dom Miguel was dead.

"Then I should be allowed to depart. But not so, they tell me the great Emperor is here, their Dom Pedro, and he will speak to me in the morning. Is it true?"

This time I detected an anxiety in his voice that told me he had not suspected the Emperor's presence until his arrest.

But I answered that Dom Pedro was then occupying de Pintra's mansion, together with many of his important ministers.

For a time he remained silent, probably considering the matter with care. But he was ill at ease, and shifted continuously in his chair.

"You are American?" he asked at last.

"Yes," said I.

"I knew, when you ask me for my English. But why does the Emperor arrest an American?"

I smiled, but there was no object in trying to deceive him.

"I was private secretary to Dom Miguel," said I, "and they suspect me of master to have plotted against the Emperor."

He laughed, unpleasantly.

"It is well your master is dead when they make that suspicion," said he; then paused a moment and asked abruptly, "Did he tell you of the vault?"

I stared at him. A Mexican, not a conspirator, yet aware of the secret vault? It occurred to me that it would be well to keep my own counsel, for a time, at least.

"A vault?" I asked, carelessly, and shook my head.

Again the fellow laughed disagreeably. But my answer seemed to have pleased him.

"He was sly! Ah, he was sly, the dear Senhor Miguel!" he chuckled, rocking his thin form back and forth upon the chair. "But never mind. It is not-

ing. I never pry into secrets, senhor. It is not my nature."

I said nothing and another silent fit seized him. Perhaps five minutes had passed before he arose and made a second stealthy circuit of the room, this time examining the barred window with great care. Then he sighed heavily and came back to his seat.

"What will be your fate, senhor?" he asked.

"I shall appeal to our consul at Rio. They must release me," I answered.

"Good. Very good! They must release you. You are no conspirator—a mere secretary, and an American."

I nodded, wishing I might share his confidence. Presently he asked for my name and residence, and I answered him truthfully.

"I myself am Manuel Pesta, of the City of Mexico. You must not forget the name, senhor, Manuel Pesta, the clockmaker."

"I shall not forget," said I, wondering what he could mean. And a moment later he startled me by bending forward and asking in an eager tone:

"Have they searched you?"

"It is my turn soon. This morning," he leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and fell silent again.

For my part I lay back upon the pillow, and taking care to face him, and so we remained until daylight came and gradually drove the shadows from the little room.

Even then my strange companion did not move. He was indeed a queer mixture of eager activity and absolute self-repression. Another hour passed, and then we heard footsteps approaching down the passageway.

With a start Pesta aroused himself and fixed a searching glance upon my face. Trembling with nervousness he suddenly raised his manacled hands and removed from his mouth a small object that glittered in the morning light.

My heart gave a sudden bound. It was the ring that opened the secret vault!

His own agitation prevented his noting my amazement. Thrusting the ring toward me he whispered, hurriedly:

"Conceal it, quickly, for the love of God! Keep it until I come for it—I, Manuel Pesta—until I demand it of Robert Harcliff, of New Orleans. It may be to-day—it may be many days. But I will come, senhor, I—"

The bolts of the door shot back and a squad of soldiers entered. Their sudden appearance barely gave me time to drop the ring into an outside pocket of my coat. As two of the soldiers seized him, I noticed that the Mexican was trembling violently; but he arose meekly and submitted to be led from the room. Two others motioned me to follow, and in a few moments we were ushered into the room where I had my interview with the Emperor.

Valcour was standing by the fireplace when we entered, and eyed the Mexican with indifference, he said to the captain:

"This is the man you found secreted in the outbuilding?"

"It is, senhor," answered the captain. "Have you searched him?"

"Only partially. We took from him this revolver, a knife and his purse. There were no papers."

Valcour took the weapons in his hands and examined them. The revolver, I could see as he threw back the barrel, was loaded in all six chambers. The knife he glanced at and turned to place upon the mantel, when a second thought seemingly induced him to open the blades. It was a large, two-bladed affair, and the bright steel showed that it was sharpened as finely as a razor.

As I watched the Emperor's spy I chanced to look toward the Mexican and surprised an expression that nearly rendered terror upon his haggard face. Perhaps Valcour saw it, too, for he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped out the seats in the handles where the blades lay when the knife was closed. A small stain appeared upon the linen, and the spy carried the handkerchief to the window and inspected the stain with interest. While he was thus engaged the Emperor entered the room, followed by his ministers, and seating himself at the table calmly proceeded to light a cigar. Evidently he had just breakfasted, for he

had an appearance of content that indicated a comfortable condition.

Valcour, returning from the window, first saluted the Emperor with great deference, and then addressed the Mexican.

"Why did you kill that man last evening and sever his hand with your knife?"

The Mexican gazed at him in horror.

"I—senhor, as God hears me, I—"

"Tell me why!" said Valcour calmly. The fellow glared at him as if fascinated. Then he threw his hands, all manacled as they were, high above his head, and with a scream that caused even the Emperor to start, fell upon the floor in a swoon.

Valcour turned him over with his foot.

"Search him!" he commanded. The men were thorough. Not a shred of clothing escaped their eyes. And after they had finished the detective himself made an examination.

Dom Pedro was evidently much interested. Without any explanation further than Valcour's accusation, all present understood that the Mexican was charged with the murder of the man found in the shrubbery, and therefore he must either have the ring upon his person or had deposited it in some secret place.

He lay unconscious after the search had ended, and Valcour, after a moment's reflection, ordered the men to carry him back to the room where he had passed the night, to guard him well, and to send for a physician.

The Emperor relighted his cigar, which had gone out, and in the interval I heard the sound of a troop of horse galloping up the street. There was no mistaking the clank of sabres, and Dom Pedro leaned forward with an expectant look upon his face, in which the others joined.

Then the door burst open and a man entered and knelt before the Emperor. I could scarcely restrain a cry of surprise as I saw him.

It was Francisco Paula.

Chapter XV

A DANGEROUS MOMENT.

NOT since I parted with him in the road on the morning of Dom Miguel's murder had I seen Paula or heard from him directly.

At that time, after giving me two men who had proved faithful both to me and to the cause, he had ridden on to the house of death—"to breakfast with his sister." From that moment his actions had been a mystery not only to me, but to all his fellow-conspirators.

But now it seemed easy to understand that the Minister of Police had been attending to the Emperor's business, and that he had also been playing a double game from the beginning, and promoting the revolution that he might the more easily crush it.

As he rose to his feet after saluting the Emperor, Paula glanced around the room and noted my presence. I could not well disguise the scorn I felt for this treacherous fellow, and as he met my eyes he smiled and twined his small mustache with a satisfied air.

"Well!" demanded the Emperor. "All is indeed well, your Majesty," returned the minister, lightly. "The leaders of the conspiracy, with one exception, are now under arrest."

"And that one?"

"Sanchez Bastro, a coffee-planter with a ranch near by. He has crossed the border. But it is unimportant."

"And Mender?"

"Imprisoned in the citadel."

"Barros?"

"He is comforting Mendez, in the same cell."

"Treverot?"

"Unfortunately, we were obliged to shoot him. He chose to resist."

"Hm! And Pexoto?"

"He is below, under arrest."

"Have him brought here." The captain left the room, and again the Emperor turned to Paula.

"You have done well, senhor; and your reward shall be adequate. It was a far-reaching plot, and dangerous. And Dom Pedro signed as if greatly relieved."

Paula brushed a speck of dust from

his sleeve and laughed in his sly fashion.

"The serpent is only dangerous, your Majesty, until its fangs are pulled," he drawled, and strolled away toward Valcour, while the soldiers brought in Senhor Floriano Pexoto.

The famous patriot was not only handcuffed, but his elbows were bound together by cords across his back. But despite his bonds he walked proudly and scowled into Dom Pedro's face as he confronted him. Indeed, I was filled with admiration to find that this man whom Fonseca had called "croaker" could be brave when occasion demanded it.

"So, my clever statesman has seen fit to turn traitor," began the Emperor, sternly regarding the prisoner.

"A champion of Liberty must needs be a traitor to Dom Pedro," replied Pexoto, with equal sternness.

"But the conspiracy is at an end, and I am inclined to be merciful," resumed the Emperor. "I am told you were the trusted friend of Miguel de Pintra, and knew his secrets. If you will inform us how to unlock the secret vault, I will promise to regard your offense lightly."

Pexoto stared at him a moment indignantly. Then he turned with a frown upon Paula.

"Ask your Minister of Police," he retorted; "for there stands a double traitor! It was he who stood closest to de Pintra, winning his confidence only to betray it. It was Francisco Paula who planned the secret vault. Who should know better than he how to open it?"

The Emperor turned to Paula with suspicion written visibly upon his stern features.

"Did you plan the vault?" he demanded.

"Truly, your Majesty. Otherwise the records would have been scattered in many places. I planned the vault that all might be concentrated in one place—where we should find them when we were ready to explode the conspiracy. Records—plans—money—all are now at our hand."

"But we have not the key. Why did you plan so complicated a lock?"

"Nothing else would have satisfied de Pintra. As for the lock, it is nothing. A drill through one